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On the Care and Feeding of Your Marriage

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ON THE CARE AND FEEDING OF YOUR MARRIAGE

Cooperative Extension Service • Purdue University • West Lafayette, Indiana
ON THE CARE AND FEEDING OF YOUR MARRIAGE

"Marriage? It's created by males, for males—a cheap way to get their sox picked up and their names carried on."
"Marriage? It's to make sex legal!"
"Marriage? It's the only way I could get away from that mother of mine."
"Marriage? It's the most fulfilling relationship I've ever had."

Asking people to define marriage is like asking them to define a Democrat. There are as many answers as there are answerers. An apt definition of one marriage will fit another marriage like Joe Namath's football pads fit Woody Allen. And that's how it should be. After all, what describes one couple might not describe another. In fact, it's almost sure not to describe another.

Why not? If you have had any experience with marriage—from living your own to reading about Dagwood and Blondie's—you have a mental picture over your head about marriage. That picture is as clear as the pictures that appear over Snoopy's head Sunday after Sunday. And what's more, your marriage picture is different than anybody else's because your picture is based on experiences unique to you.
So here we are—a world of billions of people with a corresponding number of marriage pictures above us. And when two of us meet and decide to marry, we discover that our pictures of marriage are pretty darned important. In fact, those pictures can make all the difference between a workable marriage and a not-so-workable one.

Take Nancy for example. Now there's a girl with a definite marriage picture over her head. Her picture consists of apron-filled days and demand-filled children, a husband who comes home happy to see his family every night, and not-so-new but homey house. If Nancy marries Jim—and his picture of a jet-set wife armed with tennis racket and a never-ending supply of birth control pills—there's likely to be problems.

Of course, marriage is more than pictures—a lot more. If you are married, you know that marriage is an all-encompassing proposition. Once married, people tend to think married, act married, and live married. This is not to say married people conform to a marriage mold. It is to say that being married is different than being single. And it can be a nice different if you let it be.

ALMOST EVERYONE'S DOING IT

No doubt about it—marriage is popular. In a ranking of the events of life, we would have to put marriage right up there at the top—not as high as birth and death, but almost. In the United States about 95 percent of the population marries at least once.
Despite the fires of Woman's Liberation and the cold shoulders of confirmed hippies, marriage continues to thrive. Engagement rings are still bought, society pages are still filled with wedding stories, and bridal suites are still booked up.

There's got to be a reason that so many people continue to think, "Married is better." Let's take a look at some of the reasons people marry:

"I got married because I needed one person who really cared about me—you know, an intimate relationship. I needed to care about someone, too. When I fell in love with Greg, I knew he was the one who could give this kind of relationship to me."

"I was tired of being a fifth wheel at dinner parties, being matched up with some pretty dull dames just so my unmarriedness wouldn't be too noticeable. It's a couple-oriented world."

"I was expected to get married. When you grow up, you get married; it's that simple. Besides, all my friends were getting married that year."

"I really loved Dee, and I wanted to go to bed with her. But I knew she was a virgin. I couldn't have felt good about sex with Dee unless I married her first."

"You have to have a sociable wife, one that can entertain on the spur of the moment, if you want to succeed in my line of work."

"I wanted to quit my job, but I didn't have the money. When Don offered me a life of security, complete with a nice house and a car of my own—well, how could I say 'no' to that?"

"I needed permanence. My parents had both died, my brothers and sisters were scattered, and even my friends moved so often that I couldn't keep their addresses current. Now that I'm married, there is always someone to turn to—my wife."
MARITAL SATISFACTION—
OR
DISSATISFACTION?

Perhaps you can spot some of your reasons for marrying among the above quotations. Despite your reasons for marriage, however, you did decide to marry. Now you are concerned about keeping your marriage happy—or at least making it that way.

One hundred percent marital satisfaction is certainly a worthy goal. It is also an impossible goal. Your chances of being completely satisfied with your marriage all of the time are about as great as your chances of seeing the Tonight Show on the morning reruns.

Even couples who are “meant for each other” sometimes feel dissatisfied with their marriage. No two people can live together and meet each other’s every emotional and physical demand. To expect yourself or your spouse to do so is unrealistic.

If there are any living, breathing couples who are 100 percent satisfied with their marriages 100 percent of the time, they are keeping quiet about it. At least, the marriage researchers haven’t come across them yet!

What have the researchers come up with? As you might expect, they have found that some marriages are more satisfying than others. They have also discovered that one spouse may give the marriage an A+ rating, while the other is rating it in the D— category and that wives are more likely to give the D— ratings than are their husbands.
One study showed that couples who had a positive view of life, good health, and a good income were more likely to have happy marriages than couples who had to face problems of heavy drinking, feelings of isolation and depression, and an absence of friends.

No matter what level of satisfaction your marriage is at now, you can expect some changes over the years. Marital satisfaction—and dissatisfaction, too—is about as constant as the top ten pop songs.

Not only do levels of satisfaction change over the years, but they tend to change in a set pattern as a couple goes through marriage. The advent of children, the leaving of children, the retirement of the husband all have an effect on marital satisfaction.

Carl and Sara, a fictitious couple, have always been reasonably happy together. However, in a fit of honesty they would have to admit that their marriage has hit trouble spots. Let's see how changes in the 25-year-old marriage have produced changes in marital satisfaction.

When they were first married, both Carl and Sara described their marriage as perfect. Then Sara began to feel tinges of dissatisfaction. Keeping house and working full time besides were not what she had pictured.

When Sara became pregnant and had to quit her job, she began to feel isolated. And when the demands of a baby were added to her loneliness, Sara's feelings about her marriage sank even lower. Her satisfaction kept decreasing until her son was ready for kindergarten. At that point Sara's satisfaction leveled off, increasing only when her son was ready for college. Now, at last, her satisfaction is on the upswing.

Carl's initial satisfaction did not go through as many changes as his wife's. He did experience a slight decrease in satisfaction from the
beginning of the marriage to the time his child entered school. After all, Sara, busy with a baby and housework, couldn't always care for his needs like she had done right after their wedding.

However, Carl's stimulating job filled in the gap. Things were going well for him career-wise. And when Junior entered school and Sara could pay a little more attention to Carl, Carl's satisfied feelings increased. Now that his son has entered college, Carl is feeling more and more satisfied with his marriage.

Although all couples experience some feelings of dissatisfaction, happy marriages are the rule, not the exception. Even the studies that concentrated on dissatisfied marriages found that most marriages go well all or most of the time. Eighty per cent of the couples in one study considered their marriages happy or very happy.

What can married couples do to keep their marriage satisfactory to both partners? Work at it! Working toward a satisfying marriage isn't always easy, but it sure pays off.

Sociologist Robert O. Blood suggests several prerequisites for good marriages. They provide a maintenance guide for couples who want to keep their marriages in working order.

- Compatibility Some couples are about as compatible as lemonade and pickles. Others just seem to go together. If couples are compatible—have a goodness of fit between their characteristics—they have a better chance of marital success than couples who have clashing characteristics.

- Skills Skills are in demand everywhere—even marriage. A successful marriage demands some skills, skills like understa
ing others, expressing needs, listening to the other. And someone needs to know how to cook, clean a house, balance a bank book, earn a living, care for a yard, and launder clothes.

- **Effort** All the skill and compatibility in the world would be useless if couples forgot the importance of effort. Effort means looking beyond yourself, thinking about your mate before you think of yourself. If both partners put this philosophy into practice, their marriage is likely to be a success. Effort—fixing breakfast when you really feel like lolling in bed, paying the bills when you'd rather tinker in your shop, or helping with the dishes when you'd rather watch the football game—can help make up for little differences in characteristics or lack of a marriage skill.

- **Commitment** Commitment can be vital to a marriage, or if taken for granted, it can take vitality out of the relationship. If a spouse takes the commitment "till death do us part" as an excuse to quit working at his marriage, the marriage will die before the partners. But if a couple commit themselves to the adventure of married life, the commitment will help them face challenges and threats.

- **Support** Success depends mostly on the couple and how they cope with compatibility, skills, effort, and commitment. However, outside influences can also spell success or disaster for a marriage. If parents, friends, relatives, and organizations are supportive, they will add strength to the marriage. But often outside influences are destructive. The mother-in-law who turns husband and wife against each other, the organizations that
take up too much time, the friends whom the husband likes and wife doesn't can be destructive. It is up to the couple to stand up against such outside influences—or take the chance of a deteriorated marriage.

MARITAL EXPECTATIONS

One reason marital dissatisfaction is common is that couples expect a lot from marriage. Most people expect their spouse to be a source of emotional support, companionship, sexual satisfaction, and economic support or assistance. That's a pretty big order!

Your ideas about what husbands and wives should do and what rights and responsibilities they have were formed in your childhood. As you observed your parents or other married adults, you may have learned that wives wash dishes, husbands wash cars; wives stay at home, husbands go to work; wives are submissive, husbands are dominant. Or you might have learned that husbands and wives share household responsibilities, that both work outside the home, and that both have an equal part in decision making. The expectations formed in your childhood are now part of the mental marriage picture we talked about earlier.

People who come from happy, two-parent homes usually have healthy, positive views of marriage. On the other hand, stuc
show that people from one-parent homes may have a distorted marriage picture. Why? Because these people didn't have an opportunity to observe marriage in their homes. A single parent can't serve as a marriage model. Of course, this does not mean that one-parent children are doomed to fail in marriage. It just means they need to be more sensitive, reading their marital barometer more carefully than others.

Parental influence on marital roles doesn't stop when the last grain of rice has been thrown. Young marrieds often turn to parents for assurance that roles are being fulfilled. Or couples may mentally compare themselves to parents. This is especially true for brides, who are likely to compare themselves with mothers-in-law as well as their own mothers.

Of course, you can't give your parents all the credit—or blame!—for your ideas about marital roles. Playmates, friends, relatives, babysitters—they all deserve an honorable mention for their contribution in helping you form your mental picture about marriage. Playmates may teach a boy to be aggressive; the babysitter may teach him that "big boys don't cry." Friends may teach a girl to flirt; a grandmother may teach her to be submissive.

Education also has an effect on ideas about marital roles. Educated men and women tend to be less traditional in their thinking than do uneducated people. Higher education does away with traditional ideas about male dominance about as effectively as Mary Tyler Moore smiles.

Difficulties arise when a husband's and wife's expectations don't mesh. A "women-are-supposed-to-keep-the-house-neat" husband may marry a sloppy wife. A "men-are-supposed-to-earn-a-living" wife may marry a student husband. When your
spouse's behavior isn't what you expected or think it should be, he has violated your expectations. And when you don't perform like your spouse thinks you should, you are clashing with his expectations. The term marriage counselors like to use to label such occasions is role conflict.

Another kind of role conflict may occur when your own behavior isn't what you expected it to be. A bride may think good wives should stay at home and raise children, but instead she is forced to find an outside job and put off having a baby. Her husband may think good husbands should provide a spacious home, but he can only afford a small apartment.

Role expectations are violated with the same regularity as parking meter violations. They merit about the same amount of alarm: very little. Role conflicts are a normal part of marriage. It's only natural that two people, brought up in different homes with different sets of experiences, will have different ideas about marital roles. Preconceived ideas about roles don't always materialize.

The following examples illustrate that role violations can occur at any point in a marriage.

- A bride: "I'm not a terrific cook, but I take pride in what I do manage to put on the table. I want Paul to compliment my efforts, you know, to give me some encouragement. But all I hear are complaints and 'My mother didn't make it this way.' Sometimes I feel like quitting."

- A young father: "I put in a hard day at the office, and when I get home, I'm done in. I expect Susan to be pleasant and cheerful when I come in the door. Instead, she uses me for a crying towel."

A businessman: “Dorothy can't make decisions on her own. I have to handle every little crisis that comes up, whether it's the kids, the house, the car, or the budget. Can't she do anything?”

A housewife: “My husband is never home. He's always out with the boys, bowling, or hunting. Or he's at work. If he didn't want a home and family, why did he bother to get married?”

An insurance man: “My wife wants to go to work, and I think she's crazy. I provide her with everything she wants. Besides, a woman's place is in the home.”

A retired man: “I thought retirement would be great and that Margaret and I could get to know each other all over again. You know, sort of a second honeymoon now the kids are grown. But Margaret isn't very interested in sex anymore. Says she's too old.”

Although they are perfectly normal and to be expected, role conflicts can cause problems. Some of these problems may be easy to solve; others may be unsolvable. It all depends on the nature of the conflict. For example, a role conflict concerning who cooks the meals may be easy to settle. But a conflict about heavy drinking may be serious enough to dissolve the marriage.

Because role conflicts can cause problems ranging from frustration to divorce, couples should do some thinking about their particular role conflicts. The first step is to discover role conflicts, then try to work through the differences. Sometimes one person will have to do the changing; sometimes both may yield. But the sooner the changes are made, the smoother the marriage will run. If conflicts are allowed to continue, the marriage may not!
Coping with role conflicts can be difficult. Because role expectations are based on early, ingrained learning as well as needs and circumstances, each partner is probably set in his ways, sure he is right, and his spouse is wrong.

Role conflicts are easier to cope with if each partner views the conflict as a relationship problem rather than the spouse's problem. Defensiveness is reduced when couples can say, "The problem is not your problem or my problem but the relationship's problem."

What to do about the relationship's problem? The problem can be handled if both husband and wife are willing to alter their behavior or expectations for the good of the marriage relationship. That means changing—changing behavior, expectations, or a little of both. Granted, such changes can be more difficult than making a successful soufflé. Making changes takes patience, fortitude, and maturity, all hard-to-come-by commodities. No wonder solving role conflicts is easier said than done.

Any change will be easier if it has the encouragement of the partner. Martyrdom has a way of creeping into the change process—unless the partner expresses appreciation for the change.

How can you tell if you have adjusted to marriage roles? Sociologist Robert R. Bell suggests that adjusted couples tend to feel:

- Satisfied with their individual marriage roles.
- Free to express individual personalities.
- Affectionate toward each other.
- Mutually satisfied with the marriage role relationship.
OTHER AREAS FOR ADJUSTMENT

Solving role conflicts is a big part of adjusting to marriage. Unfortunately it is not the only consideration. Religion, in-laws, social activities, money management, sex, children—all of these can be areas of adjustment.

It would be unrealistic to expect complete and immediate adjustment in all of these areas. In fact, a couple will probably never be able to work through every conflict to the complete satisfaction of both partners. No marriage is totally adjusted, but some marriages are definitely better adjusted than others.

It is up to the husband and wife to interact in such a way that they will bring out the best in each other—and their marriage. There is no personality that is bound to cause failure in a marriage. Failure results only when two personalities—the husband’s and the wife’s—don’t interact well together, and they don’t even care enough to try.

Social scientist Ruth Shonle Cavan suggests that communication, common interests, and friends will help a couple cope with adjustments. Without the ability to share thoughts, interests, and friendships, each partner will become isolated from the other. No adjustment can take place if walls are built up.
HANDLING CONFLICTS

By now, it should be clear that conflicts are a normal part of marriage. Two people can't live together in perfect harmony. It's impossible. Why?

First of all, there are too many adjustments to be made—and they must be made year in and year out. Secondly, marriage is an intimate arrangement, giving each partner a ring-side view of the other at his worst as well as his best. And because marriage is constant, bad behavior can become more aggravating than dandruff, vacuum cleaner salesmen, and cold oatmeal.

Another conflict breeder is rivalry. Rivalry is part of human nature, and therefore it is part of marriage, too. Not that marriage is like a championship tennis match complete with rooters for both sides; rivalry in marriage tends to be a little more subtle. However, it can be a big problem, especially if a couple must share many scarce resources. The blanket is only so wide, and every inch the husband gains is one less inch for his wife. There is only so much money, and if both husband and wife have need for it, they will each want it.

When conflict makes its way into your marriage, what should you do? Robert O. Blood suggests taking one—or maybe all—of these actions:

- Segregate trouble Separate wash basins, separate desks, separate cars, separate clothes closets—all of these can help remove a source of irritation. And if the source is gone, the irritation will disappear, too. If possible, change an irritating situation so that it no longer causes problems.
• **Drain off negative feelings**  If the situation can’t be changed, divert resentments into harmless channels. If tempers are cool and the atmosphere is understanding, an open discussion might help. Or some couples find joking a good way to clear the air. However, some people can’t joke without hurting their mates. If you are one of these people, joking will cause more conflict than it will solve.

Many couples will drain negative feelings in negative ways—pouting, icy treatment, withholding privileges. Others will begin round one of a ten round prize fight. Round one will begin with stinging accusations, and by round ten the couple will be hurling obscenities. Little do they realize that the hostile remarks made in the heat of battle may cause permanent scars!

This is not to say that arguments can’t be helpful. For some couples, arguing is one of the best ways to come to an understanding. But these are couples who have devised rules for their fighting. They argue only when both husband and wife think it will help, keep their voices reasonably low, let their minds rule rather than their emotions, say things they won’t regret or won’t hurt their spouse, and they argue only in private. If your relationship seems to need an argument now and then, it would be wise to adopt some rules for a fair fight.

• **Accepting each other**  If all else fails, it may be necessary to accept your spouse’s irritating behavior. Learning to be less sensitive about the behavior or to take care of the problem yourself isn’t easy. However, it may be easier than keeping up a constant battle.

For example, if your mate is an incurable light user-on-er and you resent feeling like you live in a lighted showroom, you
can do one of two things: turn off the lights yourself or become less sensitive about the problem. Sometimes accepting the spouse the way he is is best for the marriage.

**WELL ON YOUR WAY**

Adjusting to marriage takes a lot from you, but it gives a lot in return. Marriage can be the closest, most meaningful of human relationships—if both partners are willing to work at it. By being open and sharing with your mate, by exploring your marriage roles and expectations, and by devising acceptable ways to handle conflict, you will be well on your way to a vital, well adjusted marriage.

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SUGGESTED READINGS


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